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Situating Children's Rights in Cultural Perspectives on Childhood: Intermedial Dialogue

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Abstract

This article proposes an analytical approach called “intermedial dialogue” designed to fine-tune inquiries into a range of cultural perspectives on the meaning of “children” and “childhood.” The approach assesses conceptual convergence and divergence between stakeholders in children’s rights with a view to creating common ground for dialogue. The article first examines the limits of the current conceptualization of children’s rights and the need to integrate children’s views into analysis and discussion. Varied conceptualizations of “children” and “childhood” are then discussed to show the significance of culture and context. The article argues that the “intermedial dialogue” approach derived from anthropological research could prove to be a useful ancillary tool to build on prior contributions to the debate on children’s rights.

Keywords: UNCRC, children’s rights, cultural diversity, intermedial dialogue

Introduction

The 25th anniversary of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) marks an appropriate time to reflect on the significance of this legislation for the lived experiences of children, families, and communities. In what follows, we argue that the emergence and legalization of universal rights for children represents the codification of conceptualizations of children's rights anchored in Western history (cf. Mutua, 2002). Recognizing the literature on the significance of culture and context to inform this broad legislative framework, our aim as researchers is to learn more about the impact of culture and context on children and childhood and to expand common ground for dialogue around children's rights in which their views are also integrated. The purpose of this article is to define "intermedial dialogue," an analytical approach that emerged from research in anthropology, fashioning an empirical lens through which to view children, their families and communities and the societal roles that children are called upon to play.

Hanson and Nieuwenhuys (2013) called for just such an approach in their edited volume about children's rights. They argued for the conceptual integration of children's contextual realities via three concepts: living rights, or their lived experiences; social justice, or the shared normative beliefs that make rights appear legitimate for those who struggle to get them recognized; and translations, defined as the divergence between beliefs and perspectives on rights and their codification (p. 6). Thus, a method is needed to analyze how rights are formed in children's lived realities and daily struggles.

The notion of bringing children's voices into the debate on children's rights was developed in the sociology of childhood and emphasized that children should be viewed as social actors and co-producers of knowledge (Kay et al., 2012). Our work elaborates an approach through which children's perceptions and views can be integrated into meaningful dialogue in order to better assess their lived experiences. The kind of dialogue we envisage builds on the concept of intermediality used in theatre and performance studies involving the co-relation of media, or the mutual interdependence of media, including words, images, and sounds, used to express human experiences. For example, in a theatre performance, experiences are simultaneously mediated through words and bodily expressions (Kattenbelt, 2008). As modes of expression and exchange, different media depend upon and refer to each other, both explicitly and implicitly; they interact as elements of particular communication strategies, and they are

constituents of a wider cultural environment (Donsbach, 2008). A principal element in our application of intermediality is the capturing of central aspects of the wider cultural environment through the assessment of key cultural concepts used by various stakeholders in children's rights, thus, creating an opening in dialogue around meaning.

Culture in fact is profoundly intermedial: people use media to communicate with each other, to read each other's thoughts, to share and create meaning (Bloch, 2013). They use words, images, utterances, text, and technology in order to interact with a perpetually changing audience. Accordingly, we define culture as "the derivatives of experience, more or less organized, learned or created by individuals of a population, including those images or encodements and their interpretations (meanings) transmitted from past generations, from contemporaries, or formed by individuals themselves" (Schwartz, 1992, as cited in Avruch, 2012, p. 10). Avruch complements his reflection on culture with three postulates: (i) "culture is socially distributed across a population"; (ii) "culture is also psychologically distributed within individuals across a population"; and (iii) despite its customary base, culture is to some extent figured and refigured in contact with people viewed as culturally different to the group. Although culture might presume a shared value system, Avruch cautions that within such groups variation and contestation occur (see also, Rosaldo, 1993). The analytical approach that forms the basis for intermedial dialogue offers insights into how culturally and contextually grounded concepts are infused with meaning through socialization in a particular group and contact with people seen as "outsiders" to this group.ⁱ

In order to better define and delineate key concepts between stakeholder groups, intermediality directs its analysis towards the intersection and connection of ideologies and practices expressed through concepts used by stakeholders involved in the processes of meaning and sense-making (see also Thurlow & Mills, 2009) of children's rights. First, intermedial dialogue begins with assessments of which groups (stakeholders) are involved in the sense-making process concerning children's rights in a particular setting. Second, a core of key words used by the different stakeholders—such as "children," "childhood," and "children's rights"—are identified.ⁱⁱ Third, the researcher documents zones of convergence, or an overlap of conceptualization, and divergence, or a discrepancy of conceptualization, of understanding between the stakeholder groups.ⁱⁱⁱ Our approach does not resolve the tension between internationally conceived definitions of children's rights and the "local" views and practices that

might differ; rather, it offers a bridge reducing the likelihood of the imposition of dominant perspectives that do not fit the cultural and contextual experiences of children and their families.

Our argument unfolds in four sections. First, we address central characteristics of conceptualizing and implementing human rights, including the assumption of universalism that underlies articulations of human rights. Second, we draw upon work in anthropology to highlight varied conceptualizations of “childhood,” “children,” and their “rights.” Third, we show how researchers may use our approach to inform their research practice.^{iv} Fourth, we apply the principle of intermediality to the development of intermedial dialogue as an approach to analyze key concepts used by stakeholders in their sense-making process concerning children's rights in a particular context.

Conceptual limitations of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

The UNCRC began as a declaration: Children's rights, like human rights, are inherent, inalienable, and universal. This declaration advanced the idea that all human beings—regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, and other differences—are of equal value and ought to be treated equally. After decades of discussion, the move from an ethical declaration to a legal convention enabled the UNCRC to become legally binding in 1990. Set within a framework of human rights legislation, the rights advanced are positioned as indivisible, interrelated, and interdependent, and offer a clear and binding guideline for the treatment of children: defined as individuals under the age of 18, unless a country has laws setting the legal age of adulthood at a younger age.

The framework, however, both facilitates and constrains the conceptualization and implementation of the UNCRC. This work has certainly yielded significant practical results, most notably declining infant mortality and rising school enrolment overall, as well as the development of several successful collaborations, including the Early Childhood Rights Indicators Group. This group created a UNCRC assessment tool to measure State efforts in the realization of children's rights in the early years, and the resulting framework for national self-study to support data collection regarding the identification of policies, programs, and outcomes in early childhood (see Collins & Wolff, 2014; Vaghri & Arkadas, 2010). Although these achievements are laudable, the conceptual scope of the UNCRC does not factor in the experiences of “children” who assume “adult” roles in their respective communities. This can principally be attributed to two factors: the legacy of human rights discourse^v and the claims of universalism and indivisibility.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child forms part of a broader, utopian vision of the “best interests of the child” favoured by UN institutions. This view is rooted in theories of natural law and legal positivism going back to the Age of Enlightenment, and is a more recent arrival into the extended family of “universal” rights (Freeman, 2015; Freeman & Veerman, 1992). The original “rights of man” was very much a creation of a privileged land-owning class in America inspired by their republican counterparts among the French and English. Emancipation has been a work in progress—however uneven—expanding its reach over the last 200 hundred years. Notwithstanding minor acknowledgements of cultural and regional pluralism—for example, the statement that the definition of childhood may differ in countries that legalize adulthood prior to age 18—the values reflected in the declaration correspond to ideals anchored in Western history.^{vi}

Part of the “rights of the child” discourse relates to a specific perspective on human dignity: one that depends upon the perception of childhood as a state of undefiled innocence (Hanson & Nieuwenhuys, 2013). This discourse assumes an idealized view of childhood as a sort of pristine state that should be protected; it is a version of Rousseau’s 18th-century romantic view regarding the stifling nature of adult society and the desire to protect children from adult conformity (Freeman, 2015). In itself, the protection of children is the philosophical leitmotif of children’s rights legislation worldwide. The underlying claims of universalism and the concomitant erasure of cultural differences works to privilege dominant perspectives in several ways (see Benhabib, 2007; Mutua, 2002). The claim of “universal” rights necessarily implies the enumeration of the rights falling under the umbrella of protection, which in turn opens the door to the claim that they are indivisible. This has been the approach of scholars across disciplines who have contributed long lists of rights with the warrant that they are, in fact, indivisible (see Donnelly, 1984). This linkage, however, creates a conceptual domino effect; the defeat of any single right risks toppling others in succession. For example, a child’s right to clean water and a child’s right to play both enjoy the assumption of universality and indivisibility. As universal rights, then, each are part of an edifice wherein human beings are without exception entitled to seek refuge, all the more so because they are inherent.

The right to play, however, is grounded in scientific scholarship that simultaneously uses the right to play to advance its own scholarly agenda. A child’s right to play is argued for by pediatricians who claim that play is an aspect of the “optimal developmental milieu” (Milteer, Ginsberg, Council of Communications and Media on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family

Health, & Mulligan, 2012, p. e205). The necessity of play for optimal developmental outcomes has been established as a credible scientific finding, but there remains a general lack of consensus on what constitutes play, concern over the privileged status of Western notions of pretend play, and a lack of critical perspectives on children and childhood that posit children as participants in families, communities, and cultures (see Göncü & Vadeboncoeur, 2015). The literature on developmental benefits of play seems to exist as separate from the literature highlighting the roles and contributions of children in family and community life (see Goodnow, 1988; Larson & Verma, 1999). This analytical chasm makes play vulnerable. We would argue, further, that the elevation of play into a fundamental human right without both a clear definition of aspects that may be universal and a sense of the variability of play in relation to culture and context may render the overall edifice of children's rights more vulnerable as well.

Thus, the UNCRC should be recognized for what it is—a charter of rights that represents and is the outcome of a synthesis of a particular history—that is only part of a more complex picture. As Habermas (2001) already noted, “This does not mean that the answer found in the West is the only one or the best one” (p. 128), but it does mean that the space for dialogue between universal and contextual perspectives must enable both critique and reconstruction of human rights discourse. It also means that we must recognize plural conditions for and modes of dialogue, as well as see how those, too, may be constrained by Western perspectives. We hope to illustrate some of the potential of intermedial dialogue by way of two contemporary empirical examples that follow in the next section.

What makes a person a child and who determines this?

Mija lives in a small village in the extreme Southern Highlands of Madagascar. She is 14, and with her husband Velo, who is just a few years older than she, cares for their two daughters. They dwell in poor conditions and try to make a living by working the land of Velo's father. Mija and Velo both only benefited from a few years of primary school, but that does not hinder them from taking good care of themselves and their daughters. (Evers, fieldwork data; see also Evers 2002, 2006, 2014)^{vii}

When the first author arrived at the same village as the couple, she was in her early twenties and, yet, deemed old. In the villagers' view, she was considered to be at severe risk of remaining unmarried and childless due to her age. Most villagers became parents well prior to their 18th birthday and took on the roles of responsibility and work that came with parenthood. Furthermore, children had already been active, working members of their community since early youth: girls helped their mothers on the land and boys herded the cattle. The researcher observed over time that in fact, neither children nor adults viewed themselves as individuals, but as part of kinship groups of both the living and the dead as they believed that the ancestors infused them with vitality and fertility, a vital energy of the ancestors referred to as *hasina*. Even the researcher's self-image as a young, independent woman was put severely to task, as she was broadly considered as someone now past her prime, likely to have fertility issues, and who understood little or nothing of the essentials of life in this poverty stricken zone of Madagascar.

This example illustrates not only a gulf between the lived experiences of the researcher and the members of the community with whom she was living, but also a similar gap between what some authors call Western perspectives on childhood and the perspectives of other cultures (Kağıtçıbaşı, 1996; Wells, 2009). Indeed, not all societies are likely to agree with the premise that the protection of a certain age-group is an appropriate course of action for the collective welfare of the group, or more specifically, that protection is defined and practiced in one way. It would appear that the universal rights of children depend to a substantial degree on the capacity of a society to materially provide for the protected group, in this case, children. Thus, there is a disconnect when attempts are made to superimpose children's rights discourse onto the reality of such childhoods. Young people, like Mija and Velo, undertake responsibilities that are crucial for family survival, and in the process assume "adult" tasks, including that of protecting others. And although to some this might be seen as an adverse situation, we argue that it is the roles that young people play in social and economic reproduction that provide them with opportunities to develop life skills essential for survival within their community (see also Abebe, 2011; Evers, Notermans, & van Ommering, 2011).

One way to better understand the experiences of Mija and Velo is to utilize a relational approach following Huijsmans, George, Gigengack, and Evers, (2014) who noted that "[r]elationality overcomes the limitations inherent to categorizing approaches, which focus on young people in an isolated fashion" (p. 164). Setting children apart as individualized entities, as opposed to situating them in relationship to family and community, does not do justice to their

roles in broader social settings. By defining children as individuals of a certain age and excluding their contributions in a social network, we are prevented from understanding their challenges, opportunities, and constraints (cf. Rogoff, Morelli, & Chavajay, 2010). Rather, it might help to see the interlacing of socio-cultural network and individual experience. In our example, informing Mija and Velo that they are children with the right to schooling, play time, and a “better life” will not necessarily make sense. We should also ask ourselves what this “better life” offers: better life, according to whom? And, given the growing economic disparity in the West, are we in a position to claim that Western childhoods, in all their heterogeneity, are always better than the lives of the girls and boys in the world who live and work alongside their family members?

Mindful not to romanticize children's work and responsibilities in developing countries, our aim is to examine whether the classification of a person as a “child” impairs our ability to understand young people's lived experiences in relation to their families and communities, or more precisely, to examine whether our approach to inquiry might improve our ability to conduct on-the-ground assessments of the varied ways in which “children” socially and culturally are conceptualized and contribute to everyday life. The tension between universal children's rights and the need for children to contribute to the survival of the family and community, in fact, are at the core of the debate concerning child labour. According to the rights and definitions articulated by UNICEF (2015), children should refrain from labour. Further, childhood is portrayed in ideal ways that seem to reflect the lives of children from certain social classes and cultural groups, and, thus, do not even do justice to the range of living conditions in Western contexts, let alone reflect the lives of children dwelling in developing countries. As noted by Nieuwenhuys (1996) and Panter-Brick (2000), in such debates the image is often that children should refrain from working and “should have a care-receiving, safe and happy existence and be raised by caring and responsible adults” (p. 4). But children such as Mija and Velo worked as soon as they could walk: fetching water, working the land, rearing cattle and taking care of siblings. In fact, such skills were essential for them in order to live in the harsh ecological setting in which they had to survive with their families. One can even wonder whether school could prepare them for their futures in the region.

In research with working children in Ethiopia, Abebe (2011) also posed this query. In his research setting, children skillfully combine school and work trajectories, thus he argued:

Many children express their labour and economic contributions to their families very positively. Work not only gives them a sense of renewed identity and self-worth, but also enables them to redefine their social position within households. Paternalistic approaches that view working children simply as victims are therefore not only problematic analytically but also from a policy point of view. They offer a partial picture of the negative impacts of work on children's development. (Abebe, 2011, p. 168)

From this perspective, labour takes on a different definition in relation to cultural understandings and contextual characteristics. While it might be more or less valued in one society, what labour means must be seen as mediated by cultural and contextual perspectives. That said, he also proposed that it would be more fruitful to question the underlying global structures that reproduce the extreme poverty that children live in: "although children's work reflects traditional apprenticeship, socialization and skill acquisition, it is simultaneously an integral part of the global system of economic production" (p. 167). This highlights the fact that the political economy of unequal relations on a global scale cannot be ignored when thinking about children's rights; the necessity for these children to work is embedded in the global structure of inequality and exploitation (see also Jaggar, 2005).

How Intermedial Dialogue can connect the disconnected

In order to create a bridge between different conceptualizations of children's rights given the harsh reality in many settings where children are often active workers and even parents in their own right prior to the age of 18, the concept of intermediality and intermedial dialogue was developed by the first author. Researchers are often well placed to facilitate conceptual understanding between stakeholders in children's rights because they bring an analytical and inquiry-oriented perspective to their work. They ask questions across a range of informants and stakeholders, and continue to inquire throughout the process of learning about people's lives. This perspective facilitates the detection of convergence and divergence across concepts. By eliciting and analyzing the ideas of stakeholders, and then bringing stakeholders together through intermedial dialogue, researchers can contribute to bridging the divide between various stakeholders. The potential of such an approach first became obvious to the first author when in Madagascar during early fieldwork in the 1990s. The following empirical data is based upon her fieldwork reflections.

In the small town of Ambalavao I met two French female doctors who were extremely upset about the state of affairs of their six-month mandate to improve the high child mortality rates in the region. One of them stated: "I cannot understand it. These mothers let their children die on purpose. They are very friendly in our offices but do not give the medication, which often is simple ORS (Oral Rehydration Solutions) against diarrhea. I have seen women even refusing to give their children water at all." Noting the disgust and frustration of the doctors during our exchange about the bio-medical aspects of illness and treatment, I asked them to consider some other perspectives on the issue of diarrhea, which I had heard in the villages where I lived.

I could sympathize with the doctors' point of view. When I first came and saw the severe health problems of children, I wondered what good anthropology would do them and I regretted my choice of career, even occasionally wondering whether becoming a nurse would not have been a much better option. But, my experience with the villagers had taught me a lot about their worldview and allowed me to explain to the doctors the concept of *zaza rano* (see Astuti, 1995, p. 96; Evers, 2002, p. 156; Keller, 2005, p. 263), which literally means "child of water." Villagers believe that a child is soft (*malemy*) and full of water when it is born. With age, the body becomes dryer and matures. Women often explained diarrhea as a development stage and, indeed, I had noted that they would refrain from giving babies water during those times. The doctors calculated that a child probably would not survive longer than 24 hours in such conditions.

Back in the village, I talked to the women and asked them how they saw the work of the doctors. They said that they did not understand why the doctors presented them with "water" instead of "medicine" (*fanafody*) for their children. They felt disrespected as it did not make sense to them: when the child was shedding water, surely it was growing up and the doctors obviously lacked the knowledge to understand that.^{viii} I explained that in fact it was not "just water" that the doctors had prescribed, but that the medicine was in the "water" and that it was important to give that medicinal water to their children. They promised to test it and give the "water with medicine" to their children. When later they discovered that the "water" of the doctors made their children better, they could not understand why the doctors had not explained this to them earlier.

Just before the doctors returned to France I met them again. They had noted the results of my discussions with the mothers and said: "You literally save lives."

This lesson made me realize how serious the disconnect was between the worldview of the doctors rooted in Western medicine and Malagasy mothers anchored in their socialization. Their cultural perspective had informed concepts like "child," "water," "medicine" and life itself. So, even though they might use the same medium of communication, in this case a word, they meant entirely different things with it. There was a clear divergence between their conceptualizations and, based upon my experiences in the Netherlands and Madagascar, I could mediate between these groups and improve conceptual convergence so the doctors and mothers could communicate and understand each other better.

One outcome of the research described above was the recognition of the need for and subsequent development of an approach that could assess the differences between conceptual frameworks and the reality of peoples' lives (see also Evers, 2012, p. 113).

Intermedial dialogue focuses specifically on how the perspectives of diverse, culturally informed stakeholders are mediated by researchers who themselves engage within and across different stakeholder groups as they inquire into and learn from members of these groups. In the conceptualization of children's rights, for instance, varied views of stakeholders come to light ranging from those held by UN representatives, to those held by NGOs, local governments, community members, parents, and children. The views on what children's rights should entail is anything but static. Language, lexical choices, and postures are deployed interchangeably and for various reasons. Thus, in terms of scale, it is important to note that we do not view children's rights as a static global framework versus individual contextualized perspectives. Intermediality allows the researcher to view this relationship as dialectically interwoven through the process of mediation, an approach more suitable to the fluid and evolving nature of culture. The researcher then carries out a two-step function: first, critically analyzing the multiple, and sometimes competing, perspectives and, second, using that grid to carry out a further inquiry into convergence and divergence of concepts and meanings possible across stakeholders. That said, the discourse anchored in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child remains powerful and serves as a benchmark to assess children's rights according to the criteria prescribed by the convention. This increases the importance of the researcher, who is well-positioned to gather and

analyze children's lived experiences as a method of speaking back to universally codified assessments of children's rights.

We hold the view that our approach could facilitate an awareness of where conceptual convergence and divergence between stakeholders is located and foster understanding across stakeholders. Here, we outline how researchers may apply intermedial dialogue in their research. As mentioned, it builds on the notion of intermediality as the co-relation of media as mutually influencing or interacting (Kattenbelt, 2008) to elaborate the varied forms of media at use in cultural practices. Applied to anthropology, media includes narratives, expectations, ways of being, and the language, gestures, and artifacts through which these are communicated. For the purpose of our work, we have adapted the principle of intermediality and concept of intermedial dialogue as an analytical approach to understand intercultural interaction and, more specifically, to examine the ways in which perceptions and experiences are refreshed and seen anew when they come into contact with different forms of mediation, in this case for example, diverse narratives. It is our role as researchers to penetrate the deeper understandings and implications of interacting practices and discourses.

Decades ago, Griswold (1987, 1992, 1993) convincingly argued that most research fails to deal with the problem of meaning analysis altogether (see, for further detail, Evers, 2012). More recently, Mohr (1998) suggested that this could be remedied by an approach that assesses conceptual convergence and divergence.

The best rule of thumb in this situation is to locate and evaluate the relevant domain of practical activity in which the identified system of cultural meanings is embedded. Differences in practice produce (and are produced by) differences in meaning. Therefore, the goal of an empirical analysis should be to assess how the various cultural elements are differentially implicated in alternative forms of practice. (Mohr, 1998, p. 366)

Thus, discourses concerning children's rights represent the embodied practice of discursive and non-discursive expressions of, for example, what children are and what their roles and rights are across cultures and contexts. These meanings may vary between groups involved in children's lives and between the children themselves. When determining a set of key cultural concepts (like "children," "childhood," "rights"), it is important to ask how they are related to one another, while assessing the question of what type of practical utility such cultural concepts play within a

particular cultural context (see also Evers, 2012). This, indeed, is required information to be able to distil local variation, ideological assumptions, and the power relations involved.

Simultaneously, it is important to elicit and integrate children's views into analysis. In the examples cited earlier, Mija and Velo and the children with whom Abebe (2011) worked have explicit ideas about their lives. In this manner, our aims are an operationalization of Article 12 of the Convention:

State Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child. (UNCRC)

This should not simply be the responsibility of the State, but also a responsibility to which researchers hold themselves in their own code of ethics and which should be monitored by institutionally based ethics review boards when they vet researchers' proposed studies. Attending to the interests of children should be conducted in the same spirit of academic inquiry, taking into account how their experiences are influenced by contextual considerations that we would require of investigations into the experiences of adults. As anthropologists in children's rights studies have demonstrated (e.g., Reynolds, Nieuwenhuys, & Hanson, 2006), empirical inquiry integrating children's views offers a perspective or understanding of a society "from within" along with information regarding how context shapes and is shaped by children who regularly navigate life-and-death situations (see also Astuti, 2015).

Integrating the views of children helps us to better understand overlaps of conceptualization, or a high level of intermediality, that entails expanded space for the intersection and connection of ideologies and practices between stakeholders. Limited overlap of conceptualization on the other hand, or low level of intermediality, is reflected in a compressed space for intersection of ideologies and practices between stakeholders. Through intermedial dialogue, researchers can bridge various conceptual assessments of stakeholders and situate children's rights in varied cultural perspectives on childhood.

If we interpret the role of the researcher in the light of the above-cited case, the doctors and mothers had a low level of intermediality when considering their views on what a "child" is and what "medicine" or "water" are and when they should be taken. Living with the young mothers, most of whom were under the age of 18, the first author could analyze where convergence and divergence in the conceptual framing between the parties was occurring and

she could also mediate between the various views to enhance intermediality. This resulted in an improvement in communication, understanding, and, ultimately, the successful treatment of the babies suffering from diarrhea. Thus, there seems to be a potentially significant role for researchers to play in the creation of dialogue spaces for various stakeholders in children's rights. By gathering varied perspectives and bringing the stakeholders together, which in this case included mothers, doctors and policy-makers in the municipality, a researcher is in a unique position to support a dialogue that facilitates understandings regarding convergences and divergences in concepts and, ideally, to improve the communication. The composition of the group engaging in such a dialogue is then dependent on the assessment of the relevant stakeholders in a particular setting.

Levels of Intermediality

Intermediality operates on two levels: a social level and an individual level. At the social level, meaning is constructed historically, thus, individuals are born into a pre-existing social context that is filled with implicit meaning. As we grow into this world, we change and are changed by the meanings at our disposal. This is the background against which we develop our own convictions, values, and beliefs and these influence our communication. The temporal or historical aspect of this a priori recognition of intermediality is vital. When a researcher meets a 15 year-old within a specific setting, it can be said that he or she is entering into contact with a "history of relations" that has been dynamically operating for 15 years. This awareness allows for an analytical flexibility not afforded by the static definitions of a "charter of rights."

The second level of intermediality is the individual level: the unique historical development of an individual child including her sensory experiences—what she hears, sees, tastes, smells, touches, and feels—and the meaning she makes of these experiences in the moment, through reflection on the past, and by imagining the future. This second level then is formed by the individual physical, cognitive and affective aspects of a child accessing, interpreting, and transforming media as she participates in social practices (Wertsch, 1991). In turn, children influence people around them by sharing their interpretations with their peers and wider social environment. We see both of these levels as dialectically related and inseparable constituents of the life-world, or *Lebenswelt*, as defined by Husserl (1977/1936). The concepts "child," "medicine," and "water," in the example above, have different meanings in the life-worlds and meaning-making of the French doctors and the Malagasy mothers. The purpose of

intermedial dialogue is to reveal parts of the life-world through participation in dialogues, where hearer and speaker not only become aware of aspects of their life-world through the discussion of key concepts, but also create new meanings and possibly reach new understandings across differences.

It should be stressed, however, that intermedial dialogue is not just a means of translating between life-worlds; it is also an approach to analyze where convergence and divergence of conceptual framing is located. This data can then be mobilized to enhance understanding between perspectives and enable the integration of varied lived experiences and assessments of children. This is predicated on the hypothesis that different stakeholders approach notions of “children,” “rights,” “work,” and “play” and other central concepts differently. Thus, through this method of analysis, we can detect where ideologies and practices of different stakeholders intersect (high level of intermediality) and where they deviate (low level of intermediality). In other words, we can identify where context specific assessments of children, adults, and communities converge with the internationally determined rights of the child and where such views and practices diverge: Where, why, and how does a gap emerge? This analysis highlights how and under what conditions the approaches of different stakeholders in the dialogues around children's rights are mediated by cultural paradigms and with what effects.

Thus, whereas Mija and Velo in Madagascar and the children with whom Abebe (2011) worked in Ethiopia might be similar to their peers worldwide in age, given their narratives, social contexts, individual experiences and their material conditions, they have come to lead lives of work and responsibility that appear to place them at odds with the premises underlying the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Instead of categorizing them as children based solely on chronological age, research should be drawn from children's own descriptions of their lived experiences, what they have to tell us about their roles and responsibilities, and being attentive to the cultural expectations and rationales for acting in their worlds in particular ways. As a practical consideration, this sign of respect increases the chances of success in gaining the trust of young people. Mija and Velo would have been insulted if they were referred to as “children” as they considered themselves to be adults and the proud parents of two beautiful daughters. Researchers working with young people are in a position to assess varied conceptualizations that stakeholders might have, and they can mobilize their research in applied ways by building bridges between disparate life-worlds and processes of meaning-making. In the empirical example of Mija and Velo, intermedial dialogue enabled the development of a shared

understanding of several concepts with direct effects on the health and lives of infants in Madagascar. The inquiry-orientation of this analysis is designed to acknowledge the lived realities and contextual assessments on the ground as it invites researchers to question their own ideological positionings.^{ix}

Intermedial dialogue contributes to addressing the concern that particular conceptualizations of progress and development in the current discourse of human rights could be perceived as advancing so-called Western ideals at the expense of non-Western perspectives (Kağıtçıbaşı, 1996). When cultural and/or religious differences are understood as a significant barrier to human rights, our attention is drawn away from the ways in which global economic and political arrangements contribute to poverty and a lack of resource stability: economic and political arrangements that have been and continue to be dominated by Western perspectives (Jaggar, 2005). Indeed, cultural compatibility is perhaps not the central question in human rights; rather, what differentiates so many nation-states are economic conditions (Flynn, 2014) and the varied ways that cultural differences and economic conditions intersect. Alongside the increasingly wide income disparity between rich and poor nations, there is also an experiential gulf that continues to widen as access to food, education, family, employment, and housing stability are among the social determinants of health influenced by material conditions (e.g., Östlin et al., 2011). Furthermore, in the area of children's rights, economic disparity exacerbates the asymmetry in social relations between and within societies that are stratified along cultural, ethnic, and gender lines, as well as the power between adults and children. Accordingly, we would argue that discussions of the "optimal developmental milieu" (Milteer et al., 2012, p. e205), as in the research on play, are shortsighted when they occur separate from the cultural and economic contexts of children (see also Roopnarine & Davidson, 2015).

Concluding thoughts

Children's rights are a concern grounded in disparate political, cultural, and economic perspectives, as well as a desire to improve and protect the conditions of children. While an assessment and recognition of the convergences and divergences between these perspectives complicates our work, it is a necessary inconvenience. Indeed, our responsibility as researchers demands that we move beyond statements of universal rights in an effort to document different cultural perspectives on children and childhood, along with the lived experiences of children who grow into cultures and contexts that differ in many ways from our own.

Without a method of analysis, however, our call to recognize children as situated and to listen to children as culture-makers remains an expression of intent, rather than of action. We need to approach the issue of children's rights by both inquiring into, and learning about, the impact of culture and context on children and childhood. The role of researchers in intermedial dialogue contributes to the larger discussion of children's rights through the identification, clarification, and dissemination of information regarding key concepts distilled on the basis of lived experiences of members of various groups of stakeholders. To engage in dialogue with others agentively is an ability that is relational; every child learns through his or her social and cultural surrounding ways of engaging that are culturally appropriate or inappropriate. However, children do not exist outside of relations with adults (Lancy, 2012). Whether recognized or not, children are positioned in relational networks, as we all are, in which narratives and expectations are mediated to and through them. Thus, engaging in the dialogue itself becomes a method and learning opportunity for both children and adults. Researchers who are open to learning about the lived experiences of the participants with whom they work could act as mediators of this process.

Intermediality in dialogue is a process; it is not about simply expressing preconceived opinions, but rather a process within which all dialogue participants—children and adults— inquire into what they think and feel through engagement with other points of view. Included here are the many underlying and unquestioned assumptions about life, worldviews and values captured in the concepts that form the basis of the exchanges between the stakeholders. It is only by a sustained and ongoing effort to express our ideas, by addressing different perspectives, by listening to others, and by having our ideas listened to that we can reveal the ways in which our own perspectives exist in relation to those of others and work towards developing understanding across differences. As Dewey (1927) has already observed, we often are not aware of our interests and views, or what we are capable of, until we actually engage in dialogue. Utilizing intermediality as an approach to research—inquiring into conceptual divergence and convergence—creates a possibility for intermedial dialogue with regard to children's rights by including different perspectives, ways of thinking, speaking and arguing in different cultural contexts.

Recognizing conceptual divergence and convergence through the discussion of key concepts in intermedial dialogue is likely to enable the process of building common ground for dialogue surrounding the issue of children's rights. We note that common ground does not mean consensus and that, in addition to enabling the process of building convergence, it is quite

possible as well that in working toward common ground we may uncover differences that appear to be insurmountable. Disclosing this potential should not dismay researchers or dissuade us from our task as making this explicit creates the ground for discussion and understanding. Engaging in this dialogue, mitigating the effects of cultural bias and power imbalances, and questioning our own conceptual understandings enables us to better understand the lives of children and their families across a broad range of cultures and contexts, thereby, contributing to the conceptualization and implementation of policy and practice regarding children's rights.

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Notes

ⁱ Context refers to the ecological, economic, and social characteristics of life in a particular setting.

ⁱⁱ The concept of stakeholders in this context refers to the parties and individuals concerned with children's rights. Scott and Oelofse (2005) referred to "invisible stakeholders" (p. 447), defined as poor and marginalized groups. Members of these groups potentially gain advantages from attention to children's rights, but also potentially suffer the impacts. Historically, invisible stakeholders have been excluded from methods of analysis due to methodologies used.

ⁱⁱⁱ Note that discussion on the translation of such words is of particular interest as one might detect that some key words used in children rights discourse might not be understood simply because some groups do not have matching words for certain concepts.

^{iv} In this article, we define intermedial dialogue. We outline its methodological application but refrain from detailing its methodological toolkit as this requires a full-length article in itself.

^v We adopt the definition of Foucault (1982) who viewed discourse as a particular historical moment or episteme. Dominant discourses like children's rights as propagated by the UN are anchored in Western history and have powerful potential to disseminate over the globe through codifications in systems of law and further distribution via education and media.

^{vi} See also the 1990 African Union Commission Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (entered into force November 29, 1999) adopted to address the Eurocentrism of the UNCRC.

^{vii} Names are fictitious to respect the privacy of the informants. Consent for the use of their data for purposes of publication and dissemination was given by the informants.

^{viii} They also explained that they witnessed the worsening of their children's condition when water was provided. However, this water was polluted as it came from a river also used by the cattle, and for bathing and washing laundry.

^{ix} Accordingly, we support the position of Gallacher and Gallagher (2008) for a "methodological immaturity" in which adults are ontologically forced, through dialogue, to question their own ways of learning and knowing and to consider how they understand the nature of dialogue itself. Further, they are epistemologically required to take the self-understanding of children seriously (see also Pozzo & Evers, forthcoming).